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HOUSING STABILITY VALIDITY STUDY

BACKGROUND

The Housing Stability Validity Study, carried out with funding provided by CMHC's External Research Program, is the third project of a series conducted by the Community Research, Planning and Evaluation Team at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. The purpose of this series of projects has been to develop concepts, tools and methods for the planning and improvement of supportive housing programs for people with serious mental illness.

Study 1: Developing the Housing Stability Model (2001)

The Housing Stability Model¹, developed through a review of the literature and a series of multi-stakeholder collaborations, identifies the importance of continuous access to housing over the course of an individual's life in promoting health and an optimal quality of life. It identifies housing stability as a dynamic interaction among factors in four key domains (Person, Housing, Support and Systems), each of which must be effectively understood and addressed in order to promote housing stability. This model is the conceptual foundation for improving housing stability for people with serious mental illness. An initial set of benchmarks for improving housing stability and a benchmark evaluation procedure were developed based on this model.

Study 2: Application of the Housing Stability Model (2002-2003)

The Housing Stability Benchmarking Study and Educational Workshops sought to apply the Housing Stability Model and Benchmark Evaluation Procedure, developed in the previous study, to the diverse supportive housing sector in Toronto.

In the first phase of this project, the benchmarks developed in the first study were refined, and recommended practices for all of the benchmarks were identified through a multi-stakeholder collaboration. This involved the recruitment of over 40 participants, the collection of descriptive data from 10 housing partners, and numerous working group discussions to refine housing and support practices across the four domains of housing stability.

The second phase of the project involved the communication and dissemination of benchmark practices to service providers and other stakeholders, through educational workshops.

The end products of this approach were the development of 40 benchmarks and a comprehensive menu of recommended practices that promote housing stability and guide improvements in program planning, housing development and service quality.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

Objectives

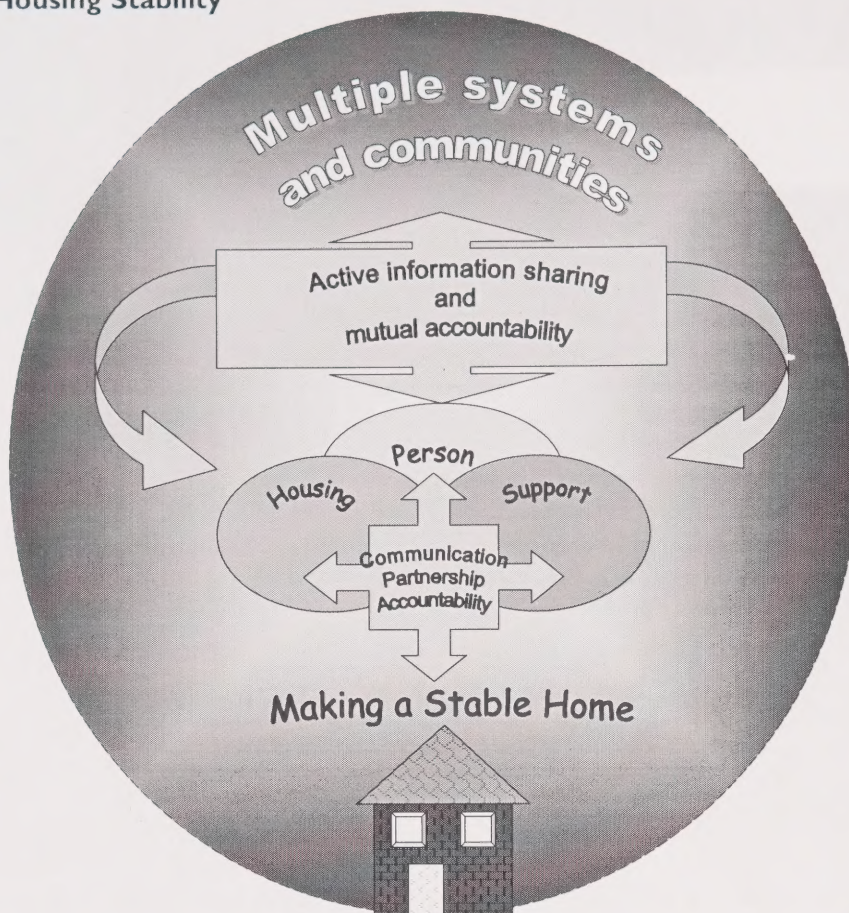
The current project builds on the work of the two previous projects. It combines the concepts, tools and methods developed in the first project with the refined benchmarks and recommended practices developed in the second project. The researchers worked in Ottawa and Halifax to examine the extent to which the housing stability benchmarking process, methods, concepts and tools, developed in Toronto, are relevant and meaningful in other Canadian cities and provinces.

Methods and Process

The researchers performed a six-step evaluation procedure, first in Ottawa and then in Halifax. Two timelines were tested as well, with the procedure occurring over six months in Ottawa and over a three-month time period in Halifax.

¹ Evaluating Housing Stability for People With Serious Mental Illness at Risk for Homelessness, CMHC Research Highlight No. 100 (2002).

Figure 1: Model of Housing Stability



1. Introductory Session and Program Visits

The research team facilitated introductory sessions for staff at two housing agencies in each city. The goal of these sessions was to outline the project, solicit feedback on the proposed workplan, obtain commitment from agencies to participate as benchmark partners, and clarify roles and responsibilities. At this time, the study team also took the opportunity to learn more about the programs and work of each participating agency.

2. Identifying Agency Priorities

The research team worked with each partnering agency to determine their targeted priority areas and benchmarks for the purposes of the study. Each agency was then supported in developing a steering committee that would participate in reviewing agency practices; comparing existing practices with those recommended by Toronto's supportive housing community; and identifying avenues for service improvements.

3. Data Collection

Using survey tools developed by the research team, designated staff from each of the participating agencies described their current practices for achieving benchmarks within the pre-determined priority areas. During this stage of the project, the research team helped agencies to describe their practices.

4. Data Analysis

After receiving the data from the agency partners, the study team incorporated each agency's practice descriptions into a chart format, allowing for a comparison between the agency partner and Toronto-based practices.

5. Review Sessions

In the review sessions, the research team worked with each steering committee to review current practices; establish how they relate to practices recommended by housing providers in Toronto; identify possible action plans for service improvement; and identify possible challenges to achieving locally recommended practices.

6. Wrap-up Sessions

The research team held a half-day wrap-up workshop with each steering committee to discuss the key lessons; solicit feedback from participants on the relevance and applicability of the Housing Stability Model, benchmarks and study process; and improve the project concepts, methods and tools. The research team also facilitated a discussion about the implications of these findings for next steps, for the agency partner, steering committee, and the Community Research Planning and Evaluation Team.

FINDINGS

Although many of the benchmarks are applicable across cities, the practices themselves may look quite different depending on the culture and norms of the city, and the type of housing offered.

Resource allocation

When the research team worked with each partnering agency to determine their targeted priority areas and benchmarks for the purposes of the study (Step 2), it was important to realize that, given the resource challenges facing most agencies, resource availability directly impacts on the roles that participating agencies and the study team are able to play. As a result, it was crucial that roles, responsibilities and resource allocation be negotiated at the onset and also throughout the project.

Translating benchmarks and recommended practices across jurisdictions

Although participants from the partnering agencies had difficulties initially in grasping benchmarking as a term that was not about quantifiable outcomes but rather the quality of processes, they translated key terms into user-friendly synonyms (such as “tools of the trade”), and eventually saw process benchmarking as a useful tool to gain perspective on their work, including areas of strength and those requiring improvements. For future benchmarking projects, translating terms into user-friendly terminology will be an important step to allow for participants to discuss benchmarks and practices meaningfully.

The Housing Stability Model

Participants were generally very positive about the Housing Stability Model. In particular, participants liked how the consumer is actively implicated as an equal partner with housing and support networks. Participants also liked the simplicity of the model, in that making a stable home requires the input of a number of stakeholders. The version of the Model of Housing Stability reflecting participants' recommendations from the Housing Stability Validity Study is shown in Figure 1.

Communication processes

At the review sessions (Step 5), in which the research team facilitated discussions with each steering committee, it was beneficial having skilled group facilitators, because a climate of patience, trust and respect needed to be maintained while keeping the group on task. Allowing all participants to name and describe their experience with a particular benchmark was empowering for them and also provided a shared understanding of how different stakeholders experience a particular benchmark or practice. Although reaching consensus was difficult, steering group members appreciated using the tool and process as a brainstorming exercise, an idea generator, an educator (for both staff and clients), and a forum for evaluation. They also found it to be a good way to network with others in the field and learn how the various stakeholders and departments could communicate better and work together more effectively.

NEXT STEPS

Propelled by the experience with and findings from this work, all project partners are pursuing subsequent steps to the Housing Stability Validity Study. In Halifax and Ottawa, concrete areas for improving current practice have been identified, with an emphasis on consumer and family empowerment. Agency participants also plan to use the guide and their experience with process benchmarking to develop new partnerships and improve existing ones, both locally and nationally.

In conjunction with this, the Community Research, Planning and Evaluation Team will continue to collaborate with agencies and systems to advocate and support process benchmarking endeavours at municipal, provincial and national levels.

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